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Black churches are urged to denounce gangsta rap

An influential pastor from Atlanta tells his peers from around the country that the music has a negative effect on young people.

By K. Connie Kang
Times Staff Writer

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African American churches need to speak out against gangsta rap and its negative influence on young people, black pastors from around the country were told this week in Los Angeles.

"The church ought to say, 'If you can't do more positive rap, shut up and get the hell out,'" the Rev. Michael A. Battle, president of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, told the third annual Pastors and Laity Conference that concluded Thursday night with a worship service at West Angeles Church of God in Christ.

In an impassioned plea, Battle, a Baptist preacher who heads the nation's premier center for black church scholarship, said gangsta rap denigrates all young blacks, especially black women.

Battle, speaking at the conference Monday, charged that gangsta rap has stolen "the soul of positive rap," meant to articulate the "sociological circumstances" of African Americans, especially men. Some raps capture the obstacles facing a teen as he tries to "become a man ... somebody with character in their turbulent circumstances."

Battle, whose center is home to six theological schools encompassing as many denominations, also attacked the "wealth, health and prosperity part" of the church as "what gangsta rap is to the hip-hop."

He said church leaders have to be bold and confront unpleasant truths about the black community. "Tell the truth, even if you don't get a federal grant," Battle said. "Tell the truth, even if you don't get appreciated by those in power."

Pastors gave him a standing ovation and spirited affirmation, applauding and repeating "Amen."

Throughout the conference, Christian leaders prayerfully and candidly considered other issues facing black churches, such as HIV/AIDS and the alienation of young African Americans from the church.

During day sessions, they met at Holman United Methodist Church, where they heard experts and then held frank discussions on the role of the black church, traditionally a strong glue that has held the African American community together. In the evening, they gathered at West Angeles Church of God in Christ for worship, during which they heard sermons by prominent black preachers, sang joyfully and prayed.

The conference began Sunday evening with theologian Lawrence Mamiya, a professor of Africana studies and religion at Vassar College, presenting a paper, "Challenges for the Black Church in the 21st Century."

Mamiya, author of "The Black Church in the African American Experience," is a third-generation Japanese American who received "a baptism by gunfire" when he went to join the Rev. Charles Sherrod's Southwest Georgia Project with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the civil rights movement.

For more than three decades since completing his graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University, where he earned a doctorate, Mamiya has taught African American studies.

He said black churches need to respond to five big challenges:

- Demographic changes, including the continued migration to the South and the growth of a black middle class.
- Improving the lot of black women ministers, who sometimes struggle to find jobs with black denominations with equal pay and treatment.
- Reconciling competing models of ministry — the prosperity Gospel espoused in some mega-churches and the social justice model preached by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.
- Public policy training for black clergy and establishing a black church institute for public ministry.
- The growth of Islam in the black community.

"Islam is present in places where most black churches are not: in the streets of poor communities and in the prisons," Mamiya said.

His research indicates that members of African American mosques tend to come from the poor and working classes while the congregants of black churches are predominantly working and middle class. What's more, Islam has shown strong growth among young black men, the group largely missing from many black congregations, he said.

One significant change since the civil rights era has been the growth of a black middle class. Although middle-class blacks were finally able to move out of inner cities, he said, one effect was disrupting the "close cohesion" that had existed among the middle-class, working-class and poor communities when they were segregated into defined areas.

The continued growth of the black middle class also calls for higher educational requirements for black clergy, he said, adding that nationwide only 20% to 30% of black clergy have seminary training.

To meet modern challenges, Christianity needs to be in the street, just as "its chief strategist — Jesus — was in the street," said the Rev. Mark V. C. Taylor, pastor of the Church of the Open Door in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Taylor, who delivered a ringing sermon Tuesday, noted in an interview that rappers refer to the street as an institution. "The rappers say, 'The streets say this,'" he said. "One reason the streets can say things is because there is not enough Christians in the street ... to challenge."

Taylor, an expert on church history with a doctorate from Union Theological Seminary, said he agreed with Battle in calling for churches to speak out.

But, as a "shepherd" to his flock, he doesn't want to wind up "blaming" these young black males for something they view as a viable choice" to help them succeed in this society.

"Many times, the educators, the shepherds, the leaders — we're at fault because we haven't said, 'Here is a better way. You don't have to be a rapper. You don't have to be an NBA player. You don't have to be a football star....' There are white executives behind them. As we become critical, let's look behind the performer to see the producer, the disseminator, the controller."

The Rev. Amos Brown, pastor of the historic Third Baptist Church in San Francisco, touched on another sore point: the virtual absence of mega-church pastors from such conferences and religious affairs meetings of the NAACP.

"Why can't they show up and be part of it?" he asked. "That's the thing that pains me."

Brown also said black churches need to help clarify values for young people.

He said it's important to remember the point Oprah Winfrey made about building a \$40-million school for girls in South Africa rather than in the United States. "When she went around inner-city communities of America to interview girls about what they wanted and what they needed, down to the nose they said, 'I want an iPod, I want designer jeans and sneakers,'" Brown said. "When she went to South Africa, these girls — some of them had been raped, others had never slept in a bed, some never had gotten three square meals — everyone of them said, 'We want an education.' We need some clarification of our values."

The Rev. Frank Portee III, pastor of the Church of the Redeemer in Los Angeles and conference dean, said that although the discussions touched painful topics, it is important that they continue.

"It is therapeutic to name the pain as well as to claim them, so that healing and deliverance can occur," Portee said.

"When pastors get together and talk about their common issues, problems and challenges, through that interchange, the holy spirit is able to empower us above the negativity and move into the direction of empowerment and change," he said.

The challenge for the 21st century black pastor, he said, is to claim the church's responsibility of providing cohesion for the community, to embrace it and pass it to the next generation.

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connie.kang@latimes.com